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## THE CHEYENNE TIPI

By STANLEY CAMPBELL

IN the general dissolution which has overtaken the civilization of the Plains Indians, the lodge or tipi has probably suffered less change than almost any other survival of their culture. Yet this shelter has seldom been carefully described. For these reasons it offers a peculiarly tempting subject to the investigator born too late to see the Indian unmodified by European influence. The Cheyenne tipi is especially interesting, not only because of the known conservatism of this tribe, but because Cheyenne tipi-making is an art controlled and perpetuated by certain societies or guilds of women. The authority of these guilds and the constant association of the tipi with the ritual of the medicine arrows, the sun dance, and the mescal cult, have prevented important change, whether of structure or decoration, until the present day. In this paper I wish first to describe the tipi now in use, and then to speak of such changes as it has undergone.

The poles are the most essential parts of the tipi. There is irony in the fact that the tent best suited to the almost treeless plains requires for its manufacture more products of the forest than any other. Yet, cumbrous and numerous as they are, the poles are the strength and beauty of the tipi. The Cheyenne spare no

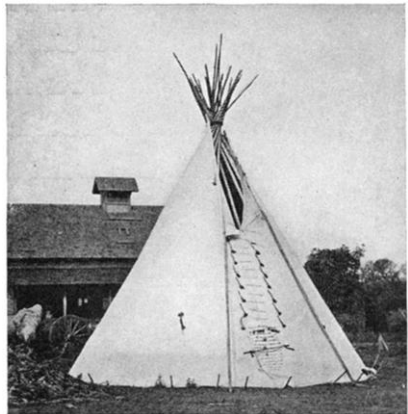


FIG. 121.—Cheyenne tipi; showing the twisted appearance of the poles at the top like the sticks of a fan.

pains to get good ones, and not infrequently travel by wagon all the way from Oklahoma to Montana for this purpose. Cedar poles are preferred because they will not rot or split, but pine ones are in common use. The trees are cut and trimmed, the bark is stripped off, and all inequalities pared away. The butt of each pole is tapered to a point, beginning about eighteen inches from the end. When finished, the poles are set up as though to receive the canvas, and left to season.

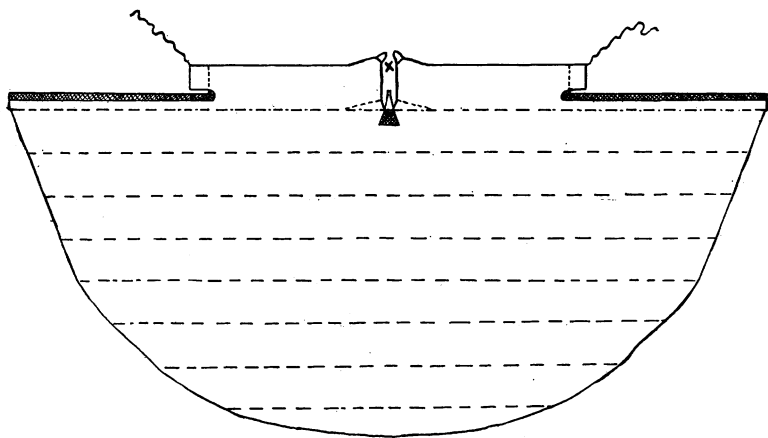


FIG. 122.—Pattern of a canvas tipi cover.

The best poles are straight as an arrow, smooth, pointed neatly at the butts, and seasoned so as not to sag under the weight of the tent covering. In use, they soon become coated with a protective varnish of shining soot, and will last for years. The Indians value them at one to two dollars each, and can hardly be induced to sell them at any price. In length, the poles measure fifteen to thirty feet; in greatest thickness, two to four inches. The number and length of available poles condition the size of a tipi, which varies from ten to twenty-five or even thirty feet in diameter. The smallest tents have about a dozen poles; the largest, thirty or more. In general, one may say that there is a pole for every thirty inches of tipi circumference. Of course, the more poles, the stancher the tipi.

The tipi is commonly made in the spring in preparation for the summer festivities and tribal gatherings. A number of women join in the work. The material (usually eight ounce duck) is cut into lengths and spread on the ground to form a rough half circle. The women run the widths together by hand, using stout white string for thread. Certain cuts are then made through the straight edge. Hems and reinforcements are added, holes for the skewers are made, and pockets are made and attached to the corners of the

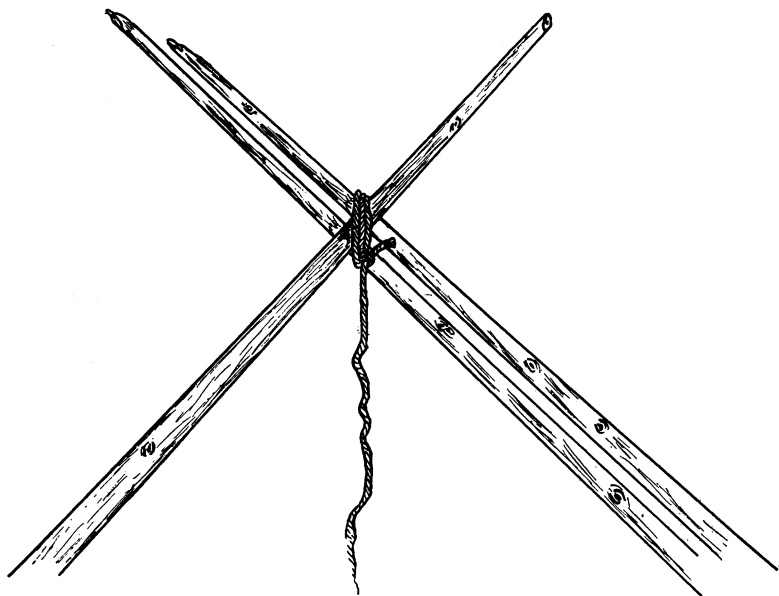


FIG. 123.—Showing the method of tying the three poles which are the foundation of the Cheyenne tipi.

smoke flaps. The canvas is then raised and fitted to the poles. The cloth is trimmed off even with the ground all round the tent, peg loops are added at the ends of the seams, and the tipi is finished.

The completed canvas of a tipi twenty feet in diameter is shown in figure 122. It approximates a half circle with a radius of twenty-two feet, the center (marked X) being between the smoke flaps. Dotted lines indicate seams; cross-hatching, reinforcements.

As compared with the Blackfoot tipis illustrated in Dr Clark Wissler's *Material Culture of the Blackfoot Indians*<sup>1</sup> the Cheyenne pattern presents interesting differences. All the principal seams run parallel with the straight edge of the canvas. The smoke flaps are longer and narrower and have small curtains or free flaps at their bases, quite lacking in the Blackfoot type. The space between the smoke flaps is much greater in the Blackfoot tipis. This is perhaps due to the neater and more compact nesting of the poles at the top of the Cheyenne tent which makes such a gap unnecessary. The Blackfoot tipis also lack the small triangles inserted in the seam at the back of the Cheyenne flaps. These triangles insure a snug fit of the canvas round poles set up in the Cheyenne manner.

As anyone who has pitched a tipi will readily agree, the arrangement of the poles is most important. The Cheyenne method is simple. Two women usually share the work of pitching. The canvas is unrolled and spread on the ground wrong side up. Two stout poles are laid across the canvas along its short axis, their butts extending several inches beyond the curved edge of the cloth. A third pole is laid across these at right angles so as to lie along one or the other of the straight reinforced edges of the canvas. The butt of this pole projects equally with the others. The poles cross at the juncture of the smoke flaps with the canvas proper. This measures the right place for the knot. One of the women now passes one end of a long rope three times round the crossing of the poles, draws it tight, and ties with a hard knot. Thus the tripod is made. The poles and knot appear as in figure 123.

Cheyenne tipis normally face east. The single pole of the tripod is the door pole and always stands just to the left of the door as you enter. When the tripod is raised this pole is carried to the east of the proposed site of the tipi, the two back poles to the west. The door pole is now seen to be tied on one side (north or south) of the back poles. In separating these back poles, care is taken to place the butt of the under or inner one to that side on which the

<sup>1</sup> *Anthropological Papers, American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. V, Part 1, p. 99.

door pole is tied. Otherwise the poles will not lock securely above. The back poles are now equidistant from the door pole, and a less distance apart. The tops of the two back poles project forward above the door pole, and form an angle or crotch above the knot. For convenience, I shall call this the front crotch.

Two long slender poles are laid aside to serve as supports for the smoke flaps. The remaining poles are about equally divided among the three sides of the tripod, although some tipis have a few extra poles on the west side.

The longest and strongest poles are placed first. The women begin just north of the door pole and work round to the north back pole. The tops of all these poles rest in the front crotch and present a curious twisted appearance like that of the sticks of a fan. The second lot of poles is placed to the south of the door pole in the same manner reversed. Lastly, the space

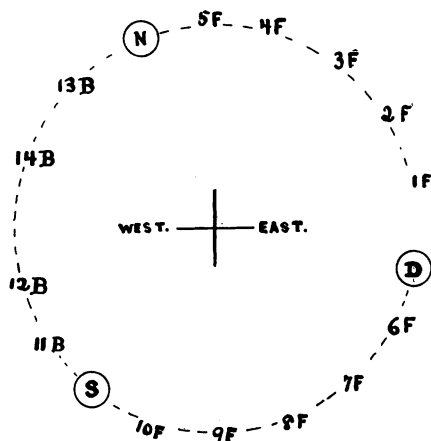


FIG. 124.—Groundplan of the Cheyenne tipi.

between the two back poles is filled. Here the women work from each side towards the middle. A space is left opposite the door to receive the last pole, the one to which the canvas is tied.

Figure 124 shows the arrangement of the poles of a twenty-pole tipi at this stage. D is the door pole. N and S are the north and south back poles respectively. Other poles are indicated by numerals in the order of their placing. After each numeral a letter indicates in which crotch the upper end of that pole rests (F, front crotch; B, back crotch). The space opposite the door is for the canvas pole. The two flap poles are not indicated as they are no part of the framework.

One woman takes the end of the long rope dangling from the crotch and carries it outside the framework just west of the north back pole. She passes round the poles sunwise (east, south, west,

etc.) four times, throwing her weight on the rope as she goes and giving it an occasional fillip so as to bind the poles tightly together. She spirals the rope down round the north back pole to a convenient height and makes it fast by drawing the end in a loop through a half hitch round the pole. In time of heavy winds this rope is stretched directly from the crotch to a huge anchoring peg near the center of the tipi.

The last pole (except the two flap poles) is now laid across the canvas along its shorter axis, the butt projecting a few inches beyond the curved edge of the cloth. The other end rests on the nib or tongue of cloth between the two smoke flaps. The nib is laid along the pole at this point and lashed to it by means of an attached strap, the ends of which pass round the pole (and nib) in opposite directions and tie, much after the old fashion of cross-gartering. The pole with the canvas thus attached is now raised and placed at the back of the tent. The women carry the sides of the canvas round the poles on opposite sides and meet at the door pole. There they pin up the canvas between the door and the smoke hole with dogwood skewers about the size and shape of a lead pencil. The left (south) side is lapped over the right, and the skewers are thrust in from right to left. The smoke hole of a large tipi is so high above the ground that a stepladder is used for this work, as formerly a travois. Such a tent is fastened together by a pair of straps knotted together just below the smoke hole inside so as to take the strain off the skewers.

The poles now stand in a circle somewhat smaller than the tipi is to be. The women move them out and adjust the canvas to fit. By means of a sharpened stake or a pointed iron bar, holes are made and the poles sunk a few inches in the ground to prevent their slipping. If the tipi is to stand for some time all the poles are sunk as much as eighteen inches, allowance having been made for the extra length when the tripod was measured on the canvas. Slanting holes are drilled and the poles thrust into them. A sharp twist is enough to make a pole slip easily under the rope at the top of the framework. Naturally, the tripod poles are sunk first.

Pegs are now driven through the loops all round the tent. A

peg is about two feet long and an inch thick and usually made of a forked branch so as to have a spur angling downward to hold the loop more securely. The flap poles are raised and their tops thrust into the pockets of the smoke flaps so as to support these. The cords hanging from the bases of the smoke flaps are tied to a convenient peg. The flap poles rest against the tipi. By manipulating these the wind is kept out of the smoke hole and a good draft for the fire is assured. Last of all, the door flap is hung on the lowest skewer.

The tipi is steeper behind than in front. This enables it to brace the better against storms, which come from the west in this region. Apparently the height of the tipi is greater than its width, but actually not so great. The floor is not circular but ovoid, flattened behind and longer from front to back than from side to side. The fireplace (excavated with a butcher knife) is somewhat nearer to the back than to the front of the tipi, and measures about twelve by eight by four inches deep.

Beds are made at the back and sides and protected by large canvas flies or linings (often elaborately decorated with beads and pendants) which are stretched from pole to pole all round and line the walls to a height of about six feet. These linings catch any moisture that may get in above, and deflect upwards any air that may enter below, thus preventing drafts from striking the people and also assisting in clearing the lodge of smoke. Though tipis are sometimes made of the flimsiest of unbleached muslin, the linings are almost invariably of good duck. In heavy beating rains they form the principal shelter, as the water penetrates the outer covering in a steady drizzle. Indeed, without them a tipi is apt to prove a cheerless habitation. It has been said that the Indian lives in his chimney. In view of the importance of these linings, one might add that the house itself is inside the chimney.

The place of honor is opposite the door. It is least subject to drafts, and no one need pass between that place and the fire. Here is the couch of the head of the family, unless guests are installed there, when he sleeps on the south side. Weapons and medicine bundles usually hang at the head of his bed. Saddlery lies next the



door on the south, as the woman's utensils on the north. Water hangs in a bucket (formerly a paunch) from one of the poles out of reach of the dogs. Wood is piled just south of the door outside. Nearby, is a shelter or kitchen for cooking in warm weather.

Occasionally one sees miniature tipis, furnished and decorated at all points, in which little girls "play house."

For ceremonial use, a tipi is pitched anew on a fresh site. No linings or furnishings are introduced. The earth is bared, and sage spread all round for seats. The fire is made on level ground and not in an excavation, except in the mescal tent. Altars are on the west side, or just west of the fire.

Painted tipis are now extremely rare, though I saw one at the sun dance in 1913. Painted linings are almost as rare. Some time ago I saw one which Yellow Hawk was making. It contained a dozen figures and was said to represent a battle with the Pawnee. This art, depending as it does upon individual initiative, will soon be lost.

On the other hand the ornamentation authorized by the women's guilds is commonly employed both for tipis and linings, and examples may be seen in every camp. These decorations consist of beaded disks and pendants like those described by Dr Kroeber in his account of Arapaho art.<sup>1</sup> The disks are called "stars," and on offering to buy one I was told that it is "against the Indians' religion" to cut them from a tent. Far from being moribund, this style of decoration is sometimes even applied to commercial wall tents!

By comparing modern tipis with old photographs and with models in the Field Museum, we may check up their differences. At a little distance a camp of today must greatly resemble one of old times, for Alexander Henry tells us that the Cheyenne tipis were "almost as white as linen." The arrangement of the poles has not changed, and pegs and skewers show no variations. The substitution of canvas for buffalo hides is the most obvious departure, and all others seem to spring from this.

In the earliest times tipis were held down by stones piled round

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<sup>1</sup> *Bulletin, American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. XVIII, Part I, p. 59 ff.

the edges. Later, perhaps following the introduction of steel knives, pegs came into use. These were driven through holes in the hides. Canvas will not bear such treatment, and the Cheyenne have learned to attach loops through which to drive their pegs. These are attached in a novel manner that bears every evidence of aboriginal invention. A pebble or other small object is thrust into the cloth from the under side so as to form a pucker or pocket. A piece of small rope is tied round the pucker below the pebble so that it cannot escape. The ends of the rope are knotted and the peg is driven through the loop thus formed.

Apart from the notching of the edges (a measure at once protective and decorative in leather work) the smoke flaps of old hide tipis appear about as regular in outline as modern canvas ones, and exhibit none of the fantastic raggedness so noticeable in the tents depicted in the *Travels* of Prince Maxmilian. Whether this is an innovation since his time, it is impossible to say.

Since coming to Oklahoma the Southern Cheyenne have given up the cut doorway of oval shape with skewers below it, and now use only the straight-edged doorway shaped by use. This may be due to the influence of canvas, or to the fact that the snowless winters of this region make a high doorway unnecessary. In any case it is a choice of two existing modes and not a departure from old custom.

The toughness of the old hide tent made reinforcements almost superfluous. In measuring the large cowhide tipi of Cheyenne make in Chicago (Field Museum, 96787) I found only two, a small one on either side the nib to which the pole is tied when pitching the tipi. The flaps of this tent measured four feet across the top. All the modern tipis I have measured have flaps three feet wide. This standardizing I believe due to the fact that eight ounce duck runs thirty inches wide. This width, eked out by the small triangle inserted at the back of the flap, makes up the three feet. In wrestling with this leather tent I learned to appreciate the place of polygamy in Indian culture. One woman could hardly be expected to manage a large tipi. This one weighed 112 lbs. Some idea of the sheer stubbornness of the thing may be formed from our guesses at the weight, which ranged from 225 to 300 pounds!

It is now the custom to build windbreaks round tipis in winter (fig. 125). These are circular barriers formed of the upright dried stalks of sunflowers, willows, or other brush supported on posts and bound together with withes. Men who knew the Cheyenne here in early times say this is an innovation. The thickness of the old hide tipis and linings made such extra shelter superfluous.



FIG. 125.—A Cheyenne tipi within a windbreak.

The unsightly and ill-ventilated wall tent is gradually supplanting the tipi and, as poles become more and more difficult to get, will continue to gain ground. At the last sun dance a careful count revealed a proportion of about five tents to one tipi in the camp circle. Although many of the Indians had undoubtedly left their tipis

at home because of the greater ease of transporting the wall tents, it is safe to say that not half the families in the tribe now possess tipis. Consumption increases as the tipi loses ground.

In conclusion, I wish to swerve from the ideal of "science for science's sake" to bear witness to the many excellent qualities of the tipi as a practical white man's tent. It would be a thousand pities if this staunchest, handsomest, and most comfortable of tents should be lost to American civilization.

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